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Milwaukee cop says she doesn't trust her department on domestic violence

Bruce Vielmetti, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel Published 4:02 p.m. CT July 18, 2018 | Updated 5:26 p.m. CT July 18, 2018



(Photo: Milwaukee County Sheriff's Office)

A Milwaukee police officer testified Tuesday she didn't report assaults by her live-in boyfriend for months because she doesn't trust her own department to take domestic violence seriously.

The woman finally did tell police in April 2017 that her boyfriend, Milwaukee Fire Capt. Leon Butts Jr., had choked her that month so badly she vomited blood. Now he's charged for that and other incidents dating back months in the couple's volatile relationship. He faces two counts of misdemeanor battery, plus felony counts of stalking, strangulation and sexual assault, all with domestic violence modifiers.

His trial began Monday and the victim — the first witness — was on the stand into Tuesday afternoon. The Journal Sentinel is not naming her because she is considered a sexual assault victim, and Circuit Judge Carolina Stark ordered television cameras not to show her face.

The six-year veteran of MPD described fights she and Butts, 48, had over mutual suspicions of cheating. She said in March 2017, he slapped her so hard she got a black eye that she lied about at work the next day.

The final straw was April 23, 2017. She said Butts was again suspicious of her cheating, without reason, and while he was in the shower, she found evidence of what she thought might be an affair among his belongings. That led to a violent confrontation in which she broke a plate and he lifted her by the neck until she nearly passed out and vomited blood.

Three days later, she reported the incident to police.

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On cross-examination, defense attorney Jane Christopherson repeatedly asked about various times and ways the victim could have reported Butts or left his home.

But the woman, 35, said the way MPD handled an earlier complaint she made about domestic violence against another man — dropping it to disorderly conduct and declining to find the elements of domestic violence — eroded her confidence.

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"If they'd have taken it seriously, I wouldn't be here today," she said. She also testified it was embarrassing to be the kind of couple police officers respond to frequently, the kind that experiences repeated arguments that lead to police calls.

Lastly, she said because the relationship seemed "perfect" at the start, she was willing to give it repeated chances as the relationship became more dysfunctional.

Christopherson also introduced several nasty texts the woman sent Butts calling him a loser in colorful ways, challenging his manhood and telling him that lots of other men in the Fire Department ask her out.

On re-direct, the woman said the texts — from among thousands the couple exchanged — did not give an accurate summary of the three-year relationship.

Christopherson also questioned why the victim didn't mention a sexual assault until her fourth interview with investigators. She said it was violating and that she had to work with the same people in the department.

Six months after the initial charges were filed, prosecutors added a count of second-degree sexual assault of an unconscious victim, from November 2016. The woman testified Tuesday that after their sex life had gone dormant, due to their increasing arguments, Butts would sometimes tell her in the morning that they had had sex, when she had no memory of it.

Butts, formerly employed by the Police Department, joined the Fire Department in 1992 and earns about \$102,000 a year. He was suspended with pay during an internal MFD investigation after being charged in 2017 and remains on administrative leave.

His trial continues this week.



Milwaukee Fire Department Captain Leon Butts runs through instructions on administering chest compressions during a CPR training session. (Photo: Mike De Sisti / Milwaukee Journal Sentinel)

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